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Who gets what and why? Committee assignments in the German Bundestag

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ABSTRACT

Although committee assignments have been researched in various parliaments, findings are inconclusive. This article contributes to the debate by analysing the allocations to specialised committees in the Bundestag, a legislature that establishes strong committees despite having strong parliamentary party groups. Studying assignments in this legislature can, therefore, help us to solve the present disjunction between ‘European’ and ‘American’ experiences regarding committee research. The study uses the congressional theories of legislative organisation as heuristic devices but explicitly highlights the strong involvement of parliamentary party groups. The hypotheses are tested with a multiple membership multilevel model across several legislative periods (1990–2013) and backed up with evidence from 51 interviews with German legislators. The results show that next to constituency demands and the influence of regional factions, there is strong evidence for a reassignment pattern and that a legislator’s occupational background and connections to interest groups matter in the assignment process.

KEYWORDS Legislative organisation; congressional theories; committee assignments; Bundestag

Modern legislatures are organised by a set of rules which allocate rights to individual legislators or constrain them. They cover a broad set of themes (agenda setting, passing of legislation) and regulate the allocation of offices by establishing intra-parliamentary institutions (Müller and Sieberer 2014). The two main intra-parliamentary institutions are parliamentary party groups (see Heidar and Koole 2000: 249) and parliamentary committees. Parliamentary party groups (PPGs) are heavily involved in running the legislature by setting the agenda, building majority coalitions, and processing legislation. Additionally, all parliaments ‘work to a greater extent or lesser extent through committees’

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(Laundy 1989: 96). These sub-groups of legislators are the prime organisational structures for preparing plenary sessions and documents. Together with PPGs, committees are 'the most important component of legislative organization and preference aggregation' (Saalfeld and Strøm 2014: 372) within legislatures.

Strong committees and strong PPGs were traditionally seen as mutually exclusive. When parties are strong and cohesive, active committees are 'unnecessary' and threaten to undermine the dominance of government and party leaders (Longley and Davidson 1998). Consequently, strong PPGs create weak committees (Rahman 2008; Shaw 1979). This led to two distinctive research 'traditions': for legislatures, in which the central role of parties is not as prominent, a large body of relevant committee research is available, most notably the US Congress and US state legislatures (Adler and Lapinski 1997; Hamm *et al.* 2011; Kanthak 2009; Overby and Kazee 2000), but also the European Parliament (McElroy 2006; Whitaker 2005; Yordanova 2009). When, as in most European countries, partisan structures within the legislature have a profound effect on parliamentary organisation and procedures (Alemán 2015) the workings of committees were, traditionally, put in second place. Research on legislatures with strong PPGs usually suggested that committees are agents of the majority coalition (Kim and Loewenberg 2005). Similarly, Damgaard (1995) argues that PPGs and committees are the two crucial organisational structures in parliaments, but the former clearly dominate the latter.

However, some legislatures have strong PPGs *and* strong committees. An example of such a legislature is the German Bundestag. This coexistence was long considered a 'puzzling anomaly' (Kim and Loewenberg 2005: 1105). Yet this offers the possibility to study the working procedures of strong committees in parliaments with strong PPGs and can help us to solve the disjunction between 'European' and 'American' experiences. An important issue to study in this regard is the committee assignment process. Committees are privileged institutions which subdivide policy areas. Their members are able to work on issues within the committee's jurisdiction before other legislators can. Having the 'wrong' legislator on a committee, therefore, risks producing outcomes with detrimental effects for the larger PPG. Following this, the main research question is: *what criteria play a role in the assignment process to committees in the Bundestag?*

This research extends into a growing number of case studies on various national legislatures (Ciftci *et al.* 2008; Fujimura 2012; Hansen 2010, 2011; Mickler 2017a; Raymond and Holt 2014). Additionally, it contributes to the discussion of committee assignments in the Bundestag, for which existing studies have presented two opposing arguments. Some scholars argue that committee assignments in the Bundestag are affected by electoral rules or candidate selection procedures (Gschwend and Zittel 2016; Stratmann and Baur 2002), while

the results presented by Mickler (2013) indicate that assignments are structured by legislators' prior occupation/education and affiliation to interest groups, with an additional influence of regional factions. The results from Mickler (2013) are, however, only based on the assignment of one legislative period (17th Bundestag) which makes it possible that outliers in this legislative period led to overestimation of the patterns. This study extends the period of investigation to multiple legislative periods (12th–18th Bundestag) and differs in the statistical model used for the analysis by applying a multiple membership multilevel model, a model well suited to analyse the complex assignment process.

The committee system of the Bundestag

For the preparation of its plenary sessions the Bundestag relies on a number of permanent 'standing' committees (*Ständige Ausschüsse*).¹ The number of committees has varied considerably in the past (1st Bundestag: 40 committees, 6th Bundestag: 17 committees). Since the 1960s, each federal ministry receives a committee as its parliamentary counterpart. Additional committees are established to divide the workload of existing committees or to underline the societal relevance of an issue, e.g. the Sports Committee (established since 1969) and the Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid Committee (established in 1998). Table 1 shows the established specialised 'standing' committees at the beginning of the 18th legislative period. Committees in the Bundestag are considered strong (Strøm 1998) and they have extensive rights to take up an issue on their own initiative (*Selbstbefassungsrecht*) and play a central role in the policy-making process. Draft legislation is submitted, after first reading, to one or more committees. After considering the legislation, the lead committee (*federführender Ausschuss*) usually submits a recommendation for a resolution (*Beschlussempfehlung*) which summarises the discussions in the committee. The plenum relies heavily on this recommendation for its final votes.

Preferences for committee membership are evaluated by PPGs via direct talks or by surveys. These preferences serve as a baseline for further negotiations to draw up the final allocation of members to committees. The final distribution needs to be passed formally with a vote in the PPG meeting (*Fraktionssitzung*), where a legislator can also initiate a crucial vote. Although this possibility exists, it is very rare.

Theories to analyse committee assignments: a congressional bias

The question arises of what factors play a role in the assignment process. Given that committee research was long characterised by a 'Washington bias – which deems Congress, and Congress alone, as the only legislature worthy of study' (Nelson 1974: 120), theories on committees are also mainly restricted to those developed to study the US Congress (commonly labelled distributive,

Table 1. Specialised committees established at the beginning of the 18th Bundestag (2013–).

Standing committee	Shadowed federal ministry/ ministries	Full/substitute members
Affairs of the European Union	–	34 / 34
Budget	–	41 / 41
Cultural and Media Affairs	–	18 / 18
Defence	Defence	32 / 32
Digital Agenda	–	16 / 16
Economic Cooperation and Development	Economic Cooperation and Development	21 / 21
Economic Affairs and Energy	Economic Affairs and Energy	46 / 46
Education, Research and Technology Assessment	Education and Research	34 / 34
Environment, Nature Conservation, Building, Nuclear Safety	Environment, Nature Conservation, Building, Nuclear Safety	36 / 36
Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth	Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth	36 / 36
Finance	Finance	37 / 37
Food and Agriculture	Food and Agriculture	34 / 34
Foreign Affairs	Federal Foreign Office	37 / 37
Health	Health	37 / 37
Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid	Federal Foreign Office / Economic Cooperation and Development	16 / 16
Internal Affairs	Interior	37 / 37
Labour and Social Affairs	Labour and Social Affairs	41 / 41
Legal Affairs and Consumer Protection	Justice and Consumer Protection	39 / 39
Petitions	–	26 / 26
Sports	Interior	18 / 18
Transport and Digital Infrastructure	Transport and Digital Infrastructure	41 / 41
Tourism	–	18 / 18

Note: This overview excludes the General Committee (German: *Hauptausschuss*) which was established at the beginning of the legislative period. It is not a specialised committee and due to its short existence it was excluded from this overview.

informational and partisan theories). These theories are the first that researchers turn to: ‘Analyzing non-US legislative bodies without drawing extensively on the literature of the US Congress is nearly impossible’ (Hansen 2011: 348).

The distributive theory of legislative organisation (Shepsle 1978) views legislatures as decentralised institutions. Legislators are primarily motivated to secure their own re-election and are dominated by geographical concerns. To accomplish their re-election, legislators seek to distribute particularistic benefits to their constituents. The distributive theory argues that committees facilitate this by dividing policy areas and allowing legislators who have a ‘stake’ in the committee’s jurisdiction to join them. The composition of committees is predicted to be unrepresentative of their parent body (Krehbiel 1990: 149) – e.g. committees dealing with agriculture will attract legislators from rural districts.

The informational theory of legislative organisation views committees as agents of the chamber to increase the efficiency of the legislative process. It highlights the uncertainty that legislators face about the consequences of policies

and argues that committees are means to reduce this uncertainty by allowing legislators to specialise. Through committees, a legislature can obtain superior information about the outcomes of bills and exploit the talents of its elected members (Gilligan and Krehbiel 1990: 533).

Both of these theories view PPGs in the legislature as weak and non-constraining. The partisan theory of legislative organisation (Cox and McCubbins 1993) contradicts this and views committees as the agents of the majority PPG leadership. PPGs are assumed to watch the assignments carefully and decide whether they are contradictory to their seat-maximising strategy. Committee assignments are part of the reward system of the PPG and loyalty to the leadership is seen as a substantive determinant of the process. Especially committees that have an effect on the national perception of the party committees 'will tend to have contingents that are microcosms of their party caucus' (Cox and McCubbins 1993: 199).

Adapting the theories: parliamentary party groups as main actors

Although the congressional theories were originally developed against the backdrop of a particular legislature, their predictions are not specific to the United States. Rather than only testing the partisan theory (which places PPGs centrally), we can also apply the main organisational implications by the informational and distributive theory. However, certain adjustments need to be made when transferring them. Most fundamentally, this requires a redefinition of the role of PPGs as important actors with regard to committee assignments (see Fernandes 2016; Hansen 2016 for similar arguments). In a European context, 'no one would seriously consider any alternative to political parties as the most important political coordination mechanism' (Müller 2000: 316). PPGs in these legislatures are characterised as being 'powerful floor coalitions, capable of disciplining their members and passing their programs, ... effectively dominating the legislative agenda and taking responsibility for the final legislative product' (Cox and McCubbins 1993: 5). Yet by relaxing the (congressional) assumption of the weakness of PPGs of the distributive/informational theory, both present perfectly feasible strategies that strong PPGs can pursue, i.e. use of the committee system to cater to external interests to increase the re-election chances of PPG members (distributive rationale) or to deal with the legislative workload by assigning policy specialists to committees (informational rationale).

Deducing hypotheses on committee assignments: who gets what and why?

The distributive rationale of committee assignments highlights the electoral connection of legislators and argues that individual legislators rely on

committees to serve their electorate. This means that those members of a PPG join committees which correspond to a 'constituency demand' of a legislator.

Hypothesis 1 *Legislators are more likely to serve on committees that correspond to their electoral connection with constituencies.*

An alternative to testing 'outlying' demands is using ties to interest groups as the drive to be assigned to a committee (see Yordanova 2009). Although these external interests are not involved in the election of a legislator, the general idea remains: connections to interest groups represent external interests and allow us to test whether legislators who have a 'stake' in a committees' jurisdiction (via their interest group ties) seek particular assignments. With regard to both distributive variables one might ask why strong PPGs would allow legislators to cater to those interests? First, it is assumed that PPGs are aware of the possible negative consequences of this assignment logic but might value the benefits more highly than the risks. The links to interest groups can bring external expertise into the decision-making process, while catering to electoral demands suits the goals of PPGs. This is connected to a second issue. This analysis aims to explain committee assignments, not what legislators can actually do. Strong PPGs still maintain other possibilities to influence the behaviour of legislators in committees.

Hypothesis 2 *Legislators are more likely to serve on committees whose jurisdiction corresponds to their external interests.*

The informational theory highlights the importance of specialised, efficiency improving committees. It predicts that strong PPGs assign members who can specialise at low cost due to advantages in knowledge related to specific policy areas that committees are responsible for. PPGs consist of legislators with various backgrounds. Exploiting the special talents of these elected members minimises the risk of undesired outcomes for the PPG and is, therefore, a valid strategy for strong PPGs.

Hypothesis 3 *Legislators are more likely to serve on committees in which they can specialise at low cost.*

The partisan rationale highlights the proactive role of the PPG leadership to 'structure' the composition of committees. This 'structuring hand' will most likely be visible in committees whose policy area concerns an important issue domain of the party. By controlling the assignments, the PPG leadership seeks to secure desired policy outcomes. This reduces the risk of an electoral defeat at the next election. One factor that is hypothesised to be used in this process is the number of legislative periods. PPGs are expected to prefer experienced legislators on those committees which are important for the electoral success of a party, and prevent less experienced legislators from serving on them.

Hypothesis 4 *An increase in the number of legislative periods has a positive effect on being assigned to committees whose jurisdiction concerns an important issue domain of the party.*

Similarly, another strategy of the PPG leadership is the assignment of legislators who are *more moderate* in terms of their policy positions. Legislators who are more representative of the mean of the PPG are less likely to produce policy outcomes that are detrimental to the party and are, therefore, hypothesised to be disproportionally assigned to committees whose jurisdiction concerns an important issue domain of the PPG.

Hypothesis 5 *Legislators who are more moderate in terms of their policy positions are more likely to serve on committees whose jurisdiction concerns an important issue domain of the party.*

Research method

The analysis makes use of a mixed-method approach. First, committee assignments are analysed by means of a statistical analysis. The initial results are cross-checked with evidence from semi-structured interviews that were conducted with legislators in January 2015 (three interviews by telephone in February 2015). A total of 51 legislators were interviewed.² The interviews were particularly important to test the influence of a constituency demand (Hypothesis 1) which I was unable to test in the statistical analysis. While scholars in the US were able to match clear district types to committees, such considerations were absent for some committees in the Bundestag (see e.g. the European Affairs Committee). Additionally, electoral districts are not a statistical unit in Germany. Therefore, one would have to rely on higher-level aggregated data and generalise over regions. The evidence of constituency characteristics is, therefore, solely addressed in the interviews with legislators.

Operationalisation of variables

The dependent variable measures the membership of *specialised* committees, i.e. those that exert both the control function and the scrutiny of bills of specific policy areas. The periods analysed comprise the 12th (1990–1994) to the 18th Bundestag (2013–2017). Committee membership lists of all legislators of the 11th³ to 17th Bundestag (effective 16 March 2013) were obtained from the parliamentary archive in Berlin in April 2013.⁴ For the remainder of the 17th legislative period, the overview lists were updated by consulting the parliamentary website twice a month. For the 18th legislative period, only the first assignments at the beginning of the legislative period are included (information based on the website of the Bundestag). The data is arranged as a person-choice data matrix with n = number of legislators \times number of committees, indicating for each legislator whether they were a member of the established specialised committees in the respective legislative period as a full member or not (dichotomous variable: 0 = no, 1 = yes). In a second variable, the membership status to committees as a substitute member (*Stellvertreter/in*) is measured

(0 = no, 1 = yes). Table 2 lists the assignments of legislators to committees per legislative period. As in most other legislatures, German legislators frequently serve on multiple committees.

Regarding advantages in knowledge, a legislators' prior education and occupation are valuable assets to specialise at low cost in a given policy area. Information on the prior education and occupation of German legislators was obtained by coding legislators' biographies from *Kürschner's Volkshandbuch Deutscher Bundestag* (Holzapfel 1993, 1995, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2012, 2013). The data were coded according to the 2008 International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-08) scheme, mostly by relying on the third level of coding (MINOR GROUPS) to account for small differences.⁵ Even though the scheme is designed for occupations, educational backgrounds easily fitted the coding schemes. The codes were then assigned to 'fitting' committees. The guiding principle was whether the prior education, and respectively the prior occupation, would give a legislator a relative advantage compared to a legislator who did not have such training (0 = not present, 1 = present for a committee). To illustrate, *Legal Professionals* (ISCO-08 code: 2610) were coded as having relevant knowledge for the Legal Affairs Committee, *Secondary Education Teachers* (2330) for the Education Committee, etc. Some codes were assigned to multiple committees, i.e. occupations coded as *Financial Professionals* (2410) were seen as providing legislators with advantages in knowledge for committees dealing with Finance, the Budget and the Economy.

Affiliations to outside groups were measured by coding responsibilities in enterprises and organisations (*veröffentlichungspflichtige Angaben*). The primary sources were remunerated activities during the exercise of the mandate (*Entgeltliche Tätigkeiten neben dem Mandat*), functions in corporations (*Funktionen in Unternehmen*) or in statutory bodies (*Funktionen in Körperschaften und Anstalten des öffentlichen Rechts*), or clubs, organisations and foundations (*Funktionen in Vereinen, Verbänden und Stiftungen*) (0 = not present, 1 = present for a committee). Simple membership of an organisation

Table 2. Number of committees per legislative period and number of legislators who served on committees.

Legislative period	Number analysed committees	Number legislators assigned to committees	Number assignments as full members	Number assignments as substitute members
12th (1990–1994)	24	632	913	962
13th (1994–1998)	21	636	802	855
14th (1998–2002)	22	654	847	965
15th (2002–2005)	20	576	699	732
16th (2002–2005)	21	581	725	786
17th (2005–2009)	21	597	774	829
18th (2013–May 2015)	22	597	802	822

Source: Own dataset.

does not qualify. The data is available online from 2005 onwards on the Bundestag's website and in the Bundestag's web archive (Bundestag 2015). For earlier legislative periods, the respective print editions of the official registers (*Amtliches Handbuch Deutscher Bundestag*) were used (Bundestag 1994, 1998, 2002).

To measure parliamentary seniority, the number of legislative periods was obtained from *Kürschner's Volkshandbuch Deutscher Bundestag*.

The additional partisan hypothesis on legislators' loyalty demands more fine-grained data on individual legislators' policy positions relative to the parliamentary party group mean. Because several problems prevent the analysis of roll-call votes and the usage of survey data,⁶ this study relies on the content analysis of legislators' plenary speeches to infer these positions.⁷ For the analysis, all speeches given during the legislative period were used (see Table 3). Questions are excluded from the analysis. Even though Martin (2011) points out that the analysis of parliamentary questions allows for a better understanding of individual legislators' preferences, political parties have strong control over parliamentary questions. In the German case, Saalfeld (2000) argues that, although questions are non-legislative tools at the disposal of legislators, legislators have to obtain the party's green light to ask them.

To analyse the data, the Wordscores technique (Laver *et al.* 2003) is used. Wordscores was chosen because it has been successfully applied to speeches for estimating legislators' policy positions (Bernauer and Bräuninger 2009; Laver and Benoit 2002) but it also suits the research goal conceptually. Wordscores compares text patterns in two sets of texts (called 'reference' and 'virgin' texts). These 'reference' documents serve as 'anchor points' for the estimation of the other legislators. For this study, speeches from each legislator are compared with the speeches of PPG leaders (*Fraktionsvorsitzende*). PPG leaders usually deliver a large number of speeches and can speak on a range of topics. Using their speeches as references is also appropriate because they are, unlike e.g. manifestos, the 'same text genre'.⁸ The basic idea is that legislators who are *more moderate* in terms of their policy positions use similar text patterns to their leaders. Respective PPG leaders were identified based on *Kürschner's*

Table 3. Number of analysed plenary documents and speeches.

Country	Plenary sessions	No analysed speeches
12th (1990–1994)	244	26,256
13th (1994–1998)	248	27,052
14th (1998–2002)	253	26,087
15th (2002–2005)	186	18,175
16th (2002–2005)	233	29,306
17th (2005–2009)	253	34,801
18th (2013–May 2015)	107	11,719

Source: Own dataset. With regard to 18th legislative period which was still 'on-going' during the research, the end point was the 107th plenary session at the end of May 2015.

Volkshandbuch Deutscher Bundestag. The reference files were scored according to the party position estimates of the Comparative Manifestos Project (Volkens *et al.* 2014).⁹ The final value for each legislator is the difference between their calculated Wordscores estimate and their PPG's mean. This approach made a calculation possible for almost all legislators.¹⁰ There are some limitations to this approach. Wordscores treats 'any text as a simple bag of words' (Scharkow 2013: 763), thus making no assumptions about syntax. It should also be clear that political parties delegate power to legislators to speak in the parliament (Proksch and Slapin 2014). However, it is assumed that more subtle deviations are possible in speeches due to their longer nature. One might generally question whether it is possible to infer policy positions from word choices. While such considerations cannot be ruled out entirely, earlier studies have shown that the approach can successfully extract underlying dimensions. Additionally, the approach used in this study accounts for this as much as possible by using leadership speeches and interpreting the obtained Wordscores estimates purely as a measurement of (dis)similarity. Before running the analysis, a validity test was carried out to test whether legislators on the same committees have more similar word frequencies than legislators from the same PPG. If so, committee membership would trump PPG membership, which would be highly problematic for the analysis. However, this is not the case. Across all PPGs, legislators from one PPG are more closely associated with each other than the committee members.

In this study, a committee's importance for a PPG is ranked based on the salience of the issues that a committee deals with for the PPG. This resonates most strongly with the re-election goal assumed by the partisan rationale of committee assignments. To operationalise this, I rely on the approach of Bäck *et al.* (2011). Their approach, originally developed to measure ministerial portfolio salience, is based on the extent to which parties emphasise themes in electoral manifestos. Similar to the original analysis, I apply the proposed 'maximalist' scheme (for a more extensive discussion, see Bäck *et al.* 2011: 452ff) to connect themes in manifestos to the policy remit of committees using the data of the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP). The specific attachment of CMP categories to committees is listed in Appendix 1 (online). The different nature of committees made some adaptations necessary as not every committee has a clear corresponding coding scheme in the CMP data (e.g. Tourism, Petitions, or Post and Telecommunication). These committees were ranked as having low issue salience. This judgement is based on the self-reported assessment of legislators during the interviews. The Budget Committee was scored as the most important committee.¹¹

Additionally, committee experience was added as a control variable. Earlier studies pointed to the existence of a pattern of a continuation of committee membership (see Mickler 2013). Legislators were coded as having committee experience if they served on the same committee in the immediately previous

legislative period.¹² Aggregating committee memberships across multiple legislative periods would mean an inflation of positive codes. When committees were merged, legislators of both committees were coded to have committee experience for the new committee. Similarly, legislators who served on committees that were split up were coded to have experience for both of the new committees.

Interpreting the models: assignments to committees in the Bundestag

The data were analysed by fitting a multiple membership multilevel model. These models are an extension to the standard multilevel framework and allow for lower-level units (here: legislators) to belong to more than one higher-level unit (committees) (Browne *et al.* 2001). These models are best suited for the data characteristics.¹³ The mixed-membership multilevel models were estimated in R using the lme4 package (Bates *et al.* 2015).¹⁴ For each legislative period four models were estimated: full members *without* (model 1) and *including* committee experience (model 2), and substitute members *without* (model 3) and *including* committee experience (model 4).¹⁵ Figure 1 depicts the coefficients and confidence intervals of the models excluding committee experience (upper row) and including committee experience (lower row) for full members and substitute members. Separate lines are used to distinguish the respective effects for each legislative period. The detailed model summaries are shown in Appendix 2 (online).

The strongest effect across all legislative periods refers to committee experience (models 2 and 4), suggesting that legislators are likely to continue on the same committee once they are assigned to it. In order to give an estimate of how much it actually ‘matters’ in terms of an increasing likelihood to be assigned to a committee, predicted probabilities were calculated.¹⁶ The predicted probability of being assigned to a committee as a full member with current committee experience is, on average across the 12th and 18th Bundestag, 53.58%. This is a very high value given the complexity of the assignment process and the fact that around one-third to one-quarter of legislators in each legislative period were freshmen. Similarly high values were also reported by Mickler (2013), thus indicating that the 17th legislative period is not an outlier. Substitute members switch more frequently across legislative periods: the predicted probability of being assigned as a substitute member to a committee with current committee experience is, on average across all analysed legislative periods, 23.92%.

The interviews underline this finding. Legislators argued that it is difficult to push someone out of a committee who has served on it and would like to continue (e.g. Interview Bundestag 150929B, 152901D, 150130B, 150129F, 150119A). If a legislator did a good job, to the general satisfaction of the PPG and the leadership (Interview Bundestag 150119A), then that legislator had

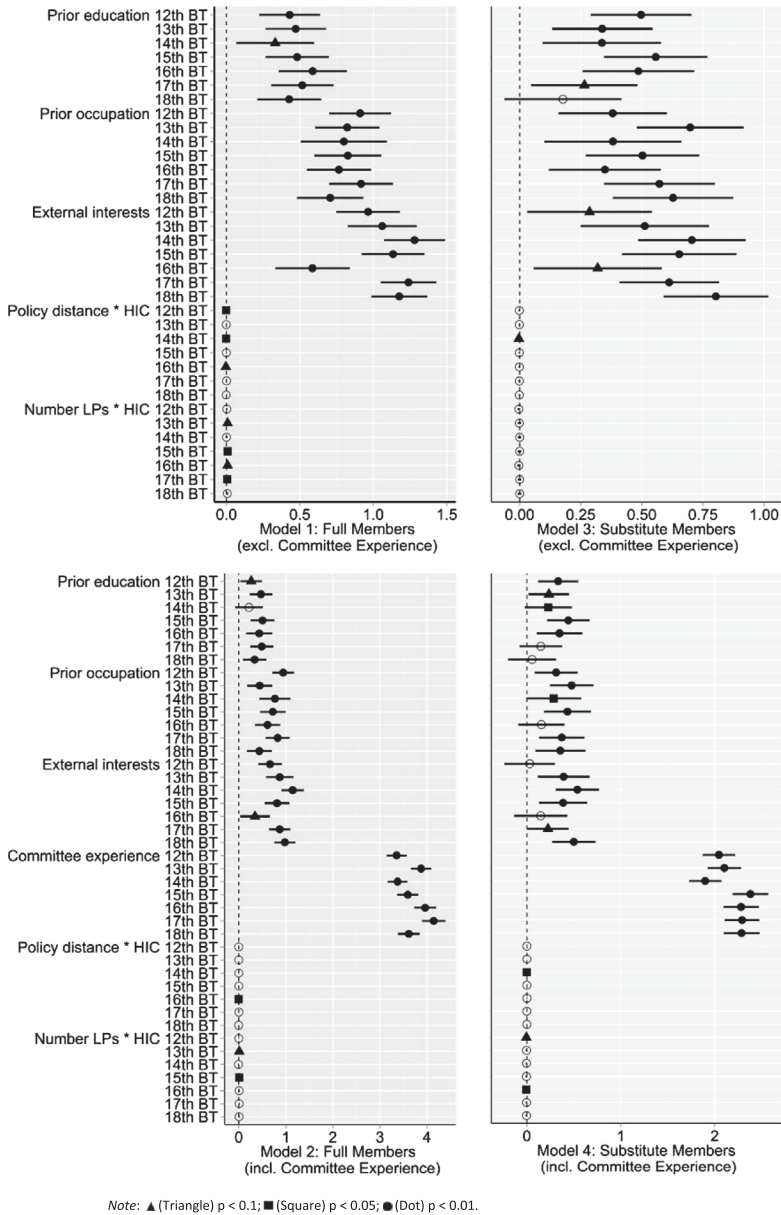


Figure 1. Coefficients and confidence intervals of multiple-membership multilevel model of committee assignments in the Bundestag 12th to 18th legislative period.

a ‘first option to buy (*Vorkaufsrecht*)’ (Interview Bundestag 150112A). The adherence to such a procedure certainly makes sense. The very specific and technical content of policy areas takes time to get used to. Legislators estimated that it takes between one year (Interview Bundestag 150126A) and two years

(Interview Bundestag 150112A, 150130A) to get acquainted with the nuts and bolts of a topic, with a minimum of half a year to be 'able to speak up and say something meaningful' (Interview Bundestag 150114H).

The effect of 'advantages in knowledge' of legislators

The model summaries of the 12th to 18th Bundestag show a clear positive connection between a legislator's prior education/occupation and the assignment to corresponding committees across all legislative periods (almost continuously passing the $p < 0.001$ threshold) as full members. Committees in the Bundestag are disproportionally filled with legislators who have advantages of knowledge in the committee's policy area (see also Mickler 2013). This overall picture is also encountered in the assignment patterns of substitute members (see right-hand plots in Figure 1). On average, the predicted probability in the 12th to 18th legislative period of being assigned to a committee as a full member with a corresponding relevant prior occupation is 5.51%, holding all other variables constant at their means (model 1). When committee experience is included (model 2) this value is reduced to 3.27%. The predicted probabilities of being assigned to a committee with a corresponding prior education in the jurisdiction of the committee is lower (2.67% for full members in model 1 and 1.58% in model 2, similar values for substitute members). Although seemingly small, these values must be seen in the context of a very complex assignment process.

Respondents from all PPGs confirmed this connection. In certain areas prior knowledge is almost a necessity (legal affairs, finance, tax issues and, moderately, health), although legislators were able to name exceptions. Note that familiarity with a topic can also stem from other areas, e.g. legislatures at the level of federal states (Interview Bundestag 150114B, 150113B, 150130E). In some instances the PPG leadership seems to follow this logic to find a fitting committee. An interviewed German legislator, who was unable to get their preferred committee spot, explained:

And then [the PPG leadership] looked at my biography and saw that I used to be a postman and then they said that would fit with the committee dealing with post and telecommunication. (Interview Bundestag 150128H)

Committee membership and external interests

Across all legislative periods there is a highly significant effect of external interests with regard to full members (left-hand plots in Figure 1) and substitute members (right-hand plots). The predicted probabilities of the effect of external interests is even higher than the effect of 'occupational background' (model 1: average predicted probability across all analysed legislative periods is 8.07% compared to 5.51% of occupational background; model 2: 4.24% of external interest compared to 3.27% of occupational background).

The interviews confirmed that there is no strict rule prohibiting these assignments (e.g. Interview Bundestag 150115C). Interviewed legislators were able to cite fitting examples, like the head of the general employee organisation (*Gesamtbetriebsratsvorsitzender*) of Frankfurt Airport and the Traffic Committee (Interview Bundestag 151401C), the president of the German Labour Union and the Social and Labour Affairs Committee (Interview Bundestag 151401E), or an operative of the Association of Statutory Health Insurance Physicians (*kassenärztliche Vereinigung*) and the Health Committee (Interview Bundestag 150114I). However, when conflicts become problematic, cases are looked at individually (Interview Bundestag 150119A). An example frequently given was being connected to organisations which represent armament manufacturers and the Defence Committee (Interview Bundestag 150119A). During the interviews, a respondent also provided an interesting insight, suggesting that only those legislators ‘who are in the mainstream of the PPG’ will not have a problem (Interview Bundestag 150113B). Only legislators of the Green party indicated that they view such assignments with suspicion (Interview Bundestag 150114I).

District characteristics and ‘outlying’ committees

A second distributive variable refers to *district characteristics*. The mixed-member proportional electoral system (nominal districts and party lists) allows for testing whether two ‘assignment logics’ exist.¹⁷ As mentioned above, I was unable to test this hypothesis in the statistical analysis. When asked whether the connection to electoral districts (*Wahlkreise*) plays a role in committee assignments, legislators generally answered in the affirmative (e.g. Interview Bundestag 150119A, 150119B, 150115D, 151901C). No legislator denied such a connection even if it was not applicable to them personally. Reasons given mostly concerned constituency characteristics (Interview Bundestag 150119A, 150119B), e.g. the constituency being an important traffic junction and the Transport Committee (Interview Bundestag 150115D). Also the presence of particular institutions motivates some legislators to seek out particular committees, e.g. army barracks and the Defence Committee (Interview Bundestag 150114E, also 150119B) or power plants and the committee dealing with energy policy (Interview Bundestag 150127A).

German legislators were, however, generally sceptical about the added value of committee work for their re-election chances (a central component of the distributive theory). Committee work was seen as ‘relatively irrelevant’ (Interview Bundestag 151201A) to the general voter. Within their districts, legislators need to have a universal view on matters which legislators described as being the ‘Eierlegende Wollmilchsau’ (literally: ‘egg laying, woollen, milk dispensing sow’, best translated as jack of all trades: Interview Bundestag 151201A; also mentioned in 151401A and 150130D). Still, legislators join committees which resonate with their districts’ characteristics because committees are the primary

source of actual information on an issue and legislators expect many questions to be on topics close to the committee's jurisdiction.

Evidence of a leadership-controlled composition of committees?

Generally speaking, the results indicate no significant effect of the distance of legislators' policy positions to the PPG mean for the likelihood of being assigned to committees of high importance. Only in some legislative periods can a weakly significant effect be found. Furthermore, the negative coefficient of the interaction effect indicates that the further away a legislator's policy positions are from the mean of the PPG, the more likely they are to be assigned to a committee of high importance. This completely reverses the prediction and contradicts the existence of a 'structuring' hand. This was also backed up in the interviews. How little the PPG leadership intervenes in committee assignments was illustrated by a legislator who explained that, with regard to the legislator's PPG, there are several committees which largely contain PPG members who are non-representative of the PPG mean and are 'outliers' with regard to their policy positions. This has ramifications for how the other members of the PPG view what is 'going on' in this committee:

For some committee delegations of my PPG, and that is especially applicable to the one I am in, which do not reflect the political majority in the PPG, the distrust [of the PPG] is greater. (Interview Bundestag 150130E)

When asked why such an outlying group of legislators was 'allowed' to cluster in a committee, the legislator depicted the role of the leadership as largely absent:

Those legislators wanted in and the leadership did not argue about it. They could have said 'we don't want you and you to be in there but would ask him or her'. But they did not and because of that it is politically unbalanced, so to speak. (Interview Bundestag 150130E)

With regard to the number of legislative periods, several models indicate a significant effect for full member assignments. The assignment of substitute members cannot be linked to such partisan considerations. Conceptually, this is not surprising. If a PPG decides to intervene in committee assignments, doing so for full members is more logical. The interviews confirmed the presence of a certain hierarchical order. For freshmen it is sometimes difficult to get into crucial committees (e.g. Interviews Bundestag 150130B, 150212A, 150120A, 150202A, 150119B). However, this is not a fixed rule. Rather, a 'mixture' is aimed for (Interview Bundestag 150128B; also 150129A). PPGs are wary of risking a knowledge gap in a committee once those legislators end their career. There is no evidence of 'reserving' seats for experienced legislators and no 'greasy pole' that freshmen have to climb before 'qualifying' for more important

committees. The system can, therefore, best be described as self-selection with restrictions.

'Beyond the theoretical framework': country-specific influences

The interviews also aimed to find country-specific patterns. The interviews underlined the two informal rules already presented by Mickler (2013): first, it is seen as 'bad style' to join a committee if one has worked in the corresponding ministry as minister or under-secretary of state. Former ministers would usually make a clean break and continue in a different policy area (Interview Bundestag 150130G). The second factor is the influence of the regional factions (*Landesgruppen*) within PPGs, especially in the larger PPGs (CDU/CSU, SPD) with regard to central committees (e.g. Interview Bundestag 150129B, 150127B, 150128D, 152901C). Although there is 'no automatism' (Interview Bundestag 150127B), larger regional factions tend to have a substantial claim for a minimum representation on a committee. Somewhat peculiar is the process in the CDU/CSU, where the influence of the regional factions is highly institutionalised. CDU/CSU legislators communicate their wishes and preferences to the chairmen of their regional factions (*Landesgruppensprecher*). These subsequently negotiate the allocation of committee seats to their members in the 'meeting of the chairmen of sociological groups and regional factions' (*Runde der Vorsitzenden der CDU/CSU Landesgruppen und soziologischen Gruppen*), internally referred to as the 'carpet dealer convention' (*Teppichhändlerrunde*).

Within other PPGs, the role of the regional factions is less formalised but it nevertheless matters. Regional factions aim to make sure they have 'a wide spread of legislators in possibly all committees' (Interview Bundestag 150112A). Particularly within smaller regional factions, the chairmen of the regional factions coordinate assignment wishes among their members to prevent unnecessary clustering:

For the small regional faction of which I am a member, [...], it is clear that we talk about this so that we will not have four of us on the Defence Committee. (Interview Bundestag 150119B)

However, the process in all PPGs is mostly coordinated directly between whips and individual legislators, while in the CDU/CSU this process is effectively delegated to the 'carpet dealer convention'. The influence of the regional factions also trumps the other factors hitherto tested¹⁸ and is, therefore, located at a higher level:

There is no chance that the Budget Committee is stacked with people from Baden-Wuerttemberg, even if they would be the greatest financial experts. The other regional factions will not allow this. (Interview Bundestag 150130G)

Additional mechanisms to prevent clustering exist in the smaller PPGs. Legislators from the Green Party pointed to the influence of political wings in

the assignment process (Interview Bundestag 150114I, 150129E, 150127A). The Left applies a double quota (East–West and women–men). However, while the women–men quota is ‘set’, the East–West quota is merely ‘striven for’ (Interview Bundestag 150126A, 150129A) as the application of both principles in small committees is numerically impossible.

Conclusion: congressional rationales with country-specific patterns

PPGs and committees are the two central components of legislative organisation and preference aggregation, promoting decisional efficiency in the chamber and allowing legislators to influence policy. Unfortunately, we do not fully understand how these two institutions interact and how strong PPGs organise their work in committees. A crucial issue in this regard is the assignment of legislators to committees. Committees subdivide policy areas and allow their members to work on issues before other legislators can. PPGs therefore need to consider carefully who is assigned to which committee to prevent committees producing outcomes with detrimental effects for the PPG.

This study addressed this issue by considering the assignment process in the German Bundestag, a legislature with strong PPGs and strong committees. For the analysis, the congressional theories of legislative organisation (distributive, informational and partisan theories) were used to disentangle several broad organisational rationales. Certain adaptations were made to account for the different institutional setting, most prominently the acknowledgement of PPGs as central gatekeepers in the process. The main findings are surprising. The ‘most obvious’ choice to capture the processes in the Bundestag would be the partisan rationale, which highlights the proactive role of the PPG leadership to explain the organisation of legislatures. However, partisan considerations were hardly influential in the analysis. More experienced legislators have slightly higher chances of being assigned to more electorally salient committees, but partisan ‘stacking’ is limited. This is an important finding. The absence of a ‘tight’ grip of the PPG leadership on committee assignments in a legislature with strong PPGs is unexpected.

This study extends evidence presented in an earlier study of the Bundestag by Mickler (2013) over a longer time period. Once a legislator has been a member of a committee, that legislator has a relatively strong claim to stay on the committee. Advantages in knowledge greatly increase the likelihood of being assigned to a corresponding committee. Many assignments can be linked to legislators’ external interests. The interviews pointed towards the importance of constituency characteristics, thus giving further evidence for the arguments regarding ‘localness’ (Gschwend and Zittel 2016). This is important evidence for a distributive rationale. However, the rationale has its limitations, as legislators argued that their committee membership provides no ‘boost’ for the

next election. The interviews also highlighted additional informal rules such as the influence of the regional factions of the larger PPGs and, for smaller PPGs, self-imposed quotas (men and women, political wings or regional considerations). Such country-specific patterns need to be included for a complete account of the assignment process.

The practice in the Bundestag with regard to external interests and committee assignments raises questions about the further implications of such a system. One might be tempted to interpret this result as 'shady', especially since the side functions and additional incomes of German legislators have been the subject of discussion in the media in the past (see e.g. Elmer and Hebel 2015). However, all that can be concluded from this analysis is that a significant share of the committee assignments of German legislators is connected to their side functions. Only if these legislators were able to work relatively autonomously might we be able to draw such conclusions. Future studies need to build on this research by analysing the relationship between committee members and the PPG and the room for manoeuvre available to individual committee members. These issues have not hitherto been widely studied.

Notes

1. The Bundestag's Standing Orders also allow for the establishment of further committees, i.e. study commissions (*Enquete-Kommission*) to prepare reports on wide-ranging matters, or additional housekeeping committees which are concerned with the smooth administration of the legislature.
2. SPD: 17 legislators, CDU/CSU: 16 legislators, The Left: 10 legislators, B90/Grüne: 8 legislators.
3. Used for committee experience for non-freshmen in the 12th.
4. These overviews contain detailed information on the start/end date of a legislator's committee membership as a substitute/full member.
5. For a few occupations it was necessary to make distinctions on the UNIT level (4 digits), e.g. with 2630 (Social and Religious Professionals) which comprises, among others, Economists (2631), Psychologists (2634) and Social Work and Counselling Professionals (2635). Economists qualify as having relevant knowledge for committees dealing with economics. Psychologists qualify for the health committee, the third group for committees dealing with social affairs. Clustering these occupations on the third coding level would mean losing essential information.
6. Roll-call votes cannot be used because there is hardly any variation in the data due to high levels of parliamentary party group unity in voting. For surveys, the major issue is missing data due to typically low response rates and the need to keep all legislators in the analysis. Additionally, it would be almost impossible to gather data on past legislative periods.
7. I explicitly refer to these as policy positions and do not discuss the results obtained in terms of *ideology*. This phrasing is more appropriate for how Wordscores estimates can actually be interpreted. It is unclear whether these actually measure ideology (see also a recent conference paper which compares

Wordscores estimates to the 'gold standard', i.e. the ideological self-placement of legislators in a survey, Mickler 2017b).

8. Manifestos' language is carefully considered and expresses parties' views in an ideal world.
9. The text corpus was prepared and analysed with the 'quanteda' package in R (Benoit *et al.* n.d.).
10. Missing values for $n = 91$ legislators.
11. The Budget Committee is ranked to be of highest importance because virtually every committee depends on it, hence its nickname 'king's committee' (Königsausschuss).
12. Scholars in the US are divided on whether a continuation of membership is evidence for the informational (greater specialisation) or the distributive theory (property rights norm).
13. (1) All legislators are assigned to at least one committee; (2) some legislators are assigned to multiple committees; (3) committees differ with regard to their importance to parliamentary party groups.
14. I would like to thank Michael Meffert and Zoltan Fazekas for their help with the analysis and interpretation of the models. All errors are the sole responsibility of the author.
15. The model includes two random intercepts (individuals and committees) to account for the data structure. Two cross-level interactions of the partisan variables with committee importance per parliamentary party group (ranking from 1 = lowest priority to n = number of committees established (highest priority)) are inserted. The main effects are not further discussed, but excluding them may lead to inferential errors. For a more detailed discussion on the consequences, see Brambor *et al.* (2005).
16. This was done using the Zelig package in R (Imai *et al.* 2009).
17. There is no 'clear' divide between those two groups. Nominally elected legislators have 'no monopoly on constituency representation' (Saalfeld 2005: 219) and candidates frequently run as dual candidates (see Zittel and Gschwend 2007).
18. Unfortunately, it is impossible to test for this influence in the statistical model. The process described here implies that the assignment chances of a legislator decrease *after* another legislator from the same *Bundesland* is assigned to a committee. However, the model used in this study estimates the assignment likelihood for all legislators simultaneously.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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